



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

FALL ASSEMBLY | PRESIDENT'S REMARKS | AUGUST 24, 2022

Good morning, and welcome to the new academic year. Even though many of us work through the summer on our Maine campuses, the Biddeford campus tends to be particularly quiet in the summer, even with COM students here in July and August. So, the return of our undergraduate students, which has already begun and will accelerate next week, is always an especially joyous time for me. It brings this campus back to life, infusing us all with energy and inspiring hope for the coming year.

I'm excited to celebrate our accomplishments from the past year this morning and to talk about our mission and the work that lies ahead, but first I would like to get a few important pieces of business out of the way.

First, the 2022/23 calendar: I'm pleased to share that this fall, we will resume celebrating Labor Day as a nonworking holiday. You may recall that we changed this to a working day to accommodate our COVID plans over the past couple years, and I'm happy to make this switch back so that you can enjoy the three-day weekend.

In light of how hard everyone has been working, I'm also happy to announce that UNE will offer two gifted holidays over the winter break this year. We will be closed on Friday, December 23, 2022, and will reopen on Monday, January 2, 2023. This will provide us with a continuous holiday celebration in which to enjoy some much-deserved time off.

And finally, and most importantly, I'm very happy to share some exciting news. Beginning this academic year, UNE will allow half-time and full-time employees who are eligible for vacation time to carry forward up to five unused vacation days into the new academic year. That means that you don't have to scramble to cram in your vacation time by the end of the academic year in May, but can instead carry it forward into the new academic year if you'd like. Stay tuned for more details from Human Resources about this new policy.

Now, onto our accomplishments. As you've seen today at the Fun Run, I ask each of you to consider, just as we ask our students, *What's Your Part?*

By now, you've likely seen our marketing campaign ads with this same theme, and the idea is this — our students share a common sense of purpose — a desire to find their unique role in making the world a better place.

Today, as we gather for this important annual event, I invite you all to reflect on your unique roles here at UNE. How does your talent, your energy, your work help to fulfill UNE's mission? What's your part in

making UNE such a special place for our students, and such a rewarding and welcoming place to work each day? UNE is a mission-driven institution, and it's important for each of us to periodically pause and reflect on our roles in supporting and advancing our noble mission.

As you think about that, I'd like to take just a few minutes to name some of the accomplishments that I'm most proud of from last year... accomplishments that have propelled our community forward in the face of some incredibly challenging headwinds.

- To begin, our undergraduate faculty concluded the framework for a new unified curriculum and are now forging ahead with its implementation.
- We launched an inaugural Innovation Celebration to showcase research, collaboration, and entrepreneurship from across the University.
- We launched new undergraduate majors in special education and criminology, and a minor in computer science. And we launched northern New England's only doctorate in nursing practice anesthesia.
- Under new leadership, our College of Professional Studies – UNE Online – underwent reorganization, re-energized existing programs, and launched new ones.
- Our Student Affairs team reorganized itself into three “hubs,” one for graduate and professional students, one focused on community life, and a third dedicated to student health and wellness. They also launched a project to enhance student resilience through enhanced counseling services and mindfulness training workshops.
- We continued to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging through several initiatives. This included adding new student affinity groups, such as our own Hillel chapter.
- Our student athletes excelled on the field and in the classroom, with our men's hockey team winning the conference championship and making it to the national “frozen four.”
- We resumed our study abroad programming at our Tangier Campus and elsewhere, and forged a new partnership with the University of Iceland in Reykjavik.
- UNE researchers continued to conduct world class scholarship. We received a major grant from the National Institutes of Health Centers for Biomedical Excellence – or “COBRE” – that reflects the continuing growth and maturation of our biomedical research programs.
- Our College of Dental medicine obtained approval from its accreditors for expanding its class size, and renovations to its facilities are nearing completion.
- We made terrific progress on the new building that will house the College of Osteopathic Medicine in Portland – the Harold and Bibby Alford Center for Health Sciences – and will be breaking ground shortly.
- We completed several key leadership searches, including welcoming new leadership in the College of Professional Studies, the Westbrook College of Health Professions, and the College of Dental Medicine, and recruiting a new provost, who will officially join us in October.
- Our student outcomes, including job placement rates, board pass rates for our clinical programs, and our exceptionally low student loan default rates among alumni, remain exceptionally strong.
- Last week we learned that UNE was again named by *The Princeton Review* as one of the nation's best institutions of higher education in its annual college guide, an honor achieved by less than 15% of colleges and universities nationwide.

- We continued to receive many other external accolades and recognitions for work, including from NECHE, the University's regional accreditor, which issued a glowing report on our five-year self-study.
- And we are about to welcome the largest and most diverse new class of undergraduates in our history, bucking the trend of declining enrollments among our peers both in New England and across the country.

I am very grateful to every member of the Nor'easter faculty and professional staff for your hard work in realizing these positive outcomes. Such accomplishments don't happen by accident. It really does take a village, and every one of us has an important role to play in our success. Thank you.

Building on this momentum, we have much work ahead for the coming year:

- We will complete searches for a new senior vice president of finance and administration, and a new associate provost for diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- The undergraduate faculty will complete their implementation of the new core curriculum.
- Our biomedical researchers will prepare and submit a new COBRE proposal to the National Institutes of Health, which, if funded, will bolster our biomedical research program for the coming decade.
- We have many initiatives underway to enhance undergraduate student success with the goal of improving our retention, progression, and graduate rates.
- We will begin a number of construction projects on the Biddeford Campus, including new signage and wayfinding and updates to the infrastructure in the Girard Marine Sciences Center, while we plan to repurpose the space vacated by the move of COM to Portland.
- We will continue our work to develop new academic programs, while updating and refining existing ones. And of course, we will remain ready to act on whatever unanticipated opportunities may arise.

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Since I arrived to UNE in 2017, I have stressed the importance of distinctiveness in the higher education landscape. What makes UNE stand out among other colleges and universities? What's going to make the difference in encouraging a student to choose us?

I asked each academic unit to examine what specifically distinguished it from similar programs at peer institutions and to envision how it could become more distinctive. I essentially asked you — *what is your part?* Most of you took this challenge seriously. You crafted plans and then you acted on them, and your programs have flourished, or at least held their own in an incredibly competitive higher education climate. That is a noteworthy achievement.

But this project isn't a one-and-done affair. It requires continuous effort, combining ongoing monitoring of workforce trends, self-reflection, planning, and execution. And it must happen at every level — from individual programs to the University as a whole.

Toward this end, this summer we launched a revision of the "About" page on the UNE website to better express six attributes that, taken together, make our community the truly unique place it is. These include:

- A deep sense of purpose
- An outstanding return on investment
- A marriage of experiential learning outside the classroom with active learning within the classroom

- An extraordinarily welcoming community
- Inspiring campus locations
- And a robust Marketplace of Ideas.

I invite you all to check out that page. It really articulates what makes UNE such an extraordinary institution.

I'd like to take a moment this morning to elaborate on that final attribute — the marketplace of ideas. When I think about UNE's part in the landscape of higher education, I see a real opportunity for us to distinguish ourselves as an institution that really embodies this value.

Because it should be at the core of the mission of all universities, and yet it is under attack from both within and outside the academy.

I want to begin by asking a simple question, one to which the answer may at first seem readily evident: Why are we here?

With apologies to anyone who isn't a Star Trek fan, if we were the crew of the Starship Enterprise, our mission would be clear: "To explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before." And that mission would apply whether you were the captain, an engineer, a science officer, or a newly minted cadet. If we were a police department, our mission would be to serve and protect -- from the chief all the way down to the dispatcher taking your call when you dial 911.

So, I'm going to ask again:

Why do all of us—humanities faculty, research scientists, medical professionals, business people and technologists, athletes and coaches, office workers, marketers, groundskeepers, security officers, accountants— why do we show up every day to work at a university on the southern coast of Maine? Why are we all here together this morning?

What mission unites us?

If you were to ask me that question, I would answer that, at the most fundamental level, we are here in pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. Of enlightenment. Of truth. We are collectively engaged in the process of adding to humanity's sum of knowledge and transmitting it to subsequent generations.

In fact, this purpose is reflected in UNE's seal, on which our moto reads "*Lucens et Ardens*," which roughly translates from Latin as "passion for enlightenment" — that is, a passion for seeking truth.

Now let's be clear: this is a pursuit whose path has never been one of straightforward progress. But also, never has it been more tangled and treacherous and convoluted than it is today. Those of us over the age of, say, forty or so, will remember growing up in a world in which, even in the face of critical social and political divisions, we could generally agree on basic facts, on basic information, which formed the starting point for discussion and debate.

Today, due to multiple factors, including the proliferation of targeted media and technology, our very perceptions of facts themselves differ radically from those of our fellow citizens.

Fed by cable TV "news" shows and social media algorithms, we increasingly live in self-imposed ideological bubbles. Without even realizing it, we find ourselves exclusively surrounded by people who share our worldview and our biases and isolated from those who think differently, thereby leading to different perceptions of basic information. It's hard to have a productive conversation

with someone who has different beliefs or perspectives when we can't even agree on what we're talking to each other about in the first place.

I don't need to remind any of you that we live in troubled times. Climate change is accelerating even faster than experts predicted just a few years ago. The COVID pandemic disrupted every aspect of our lives, and its ripple effects will continue to be felt for years to come. The unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine has upended the international consensus against wars of territorial conquest. So called "culture wars" in our society, over issues ranging from firearms, to abortion, to the legitimacy of elections, to what is taught in public schools, to how we understand race and how we best combat racism, tear at the fabric of American society. Conspiracy theories abound. Our country is arguably politically and culturally more polarized than at any time since the Civil War. Each of our major political parties has moved farther to the extremes, straining the center and making compromise all but impossible. Faith in our civic institutions has plummeted, threatening the American democratic project itself.

So that's the world we live in. And to paraphrase the "*What's Your Part?*" campaign: it's a world that could use some help.

And that is, perhaps, the most critical reason the academy must defend itself as a stronghold of viewpoint diversity and open discourse. Effectively addressing our many global and societal challenges requires promoting genuine good-faith dialogue across lines of difference.

Arriving at innovative solutions to our problems requires surfacing the widest possible variety of ideas, and then sorting and refining them through the process of experimentation and critical discourse. And putting innovations into practice requires that we forge the will to act, which in the case of public policies, depends on engagement and compromise across political and cultural divides.

Since antiquity, universities and their precursor institutions, dating all the way back to the Greek Lyceum, have served this purpose, holding what I can only describe as a sacred role in society: to foster the exchange of ideas and critical discourse on important, controversial topics.

Discourse without diversity of ideas — that is, discussions limited to those who already share our perspectives — may feel good, but will invariably fall short of fostering the breakthroughs we need on important problems.

More recently, cognitive psychologists have demonstrated that we all have biases in our thinking. None of us have a god's eye perspective on truth. Like perceptual blind spots, it's difficult to see, much less correct for, one's own biases. The best way to correct for bias is through engaging thoughtfully with others who hold different biases by actively inviting them to criticize of our ideas.

And yet, the very idea of viewpoint diversity and robust discourse across differences is now under attack from both far-right and far-left political movements — from both outside forces and from within the academy itself. Over the past few months, right-wing politicians in 15 states have passed legislation seeking to dictate how slavery and its aftermath can be discussed in classrooms. Efforts to ban books discussing sexual identities and preferences are on the rise. Faculty at some red-state universities have faced sanctions for sharing their expertise in public forums when it conflicts with the agendas of state governments.

And such illiberal efforts to stifle expression and discourse are not limited to the right. Left-wing activists, often tacitly supported by university administrators, are also culpable. Renowned scholars have had their invitations to speak at institutions like MIT on topics as benign as planetary science cancelled because of social media-fueled uproars around the speaker's unrelated criticism of policies at their home university. Professors at institutions around the country have been disciplined or even fired under dubious pretexts when they questioned the received ideological orthodoxy around race or

gender. And students at institutions as prestigious as Yale Law continue to use the so-called heckler's veto to shout down and silence speakers with whom they disagree. And most disturbing of all, some pundits have tried to justify the indefensible: The attempted murder less than two weeks ago of a novelist because his work offended their religious sensibilities.

Fueled by social media, such attacks on open expression have given rise to a stifling sense of fear and intimidation. Indeed, several recent polls have demonstrated the rapid growth of self-censorship on college campuses. Students, faculty, and professional staff alike live in fear that a heterodox opinion or even a decontextualized comment could invite self-righteous mobs to call for their head.

And let's not fool ourselves into believing that this doesn't happen at UNE. I've had a number of students reach out to me to share how they bite their tongue and remain silent out of fear of retribution by peers or professors.

Given the times in which we find ourselves, it is more important than ever that universities recommit themselves to their role of encouraging discourse across differences — that is, to fostering a robust Marketplace of Ideas. And as I noted before, building this marketplace depends on our actively encouraging and promoting diversity of perspectives and ideas within our community. Moreover, in promoting ideological diversity, we must avoid the mistake of assuming that identity neatly corresponds to ideology. There is tremendous heterogeneity among individuals within any given identity group. Diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, and the like are very important in their own right. But they simply cannot serve as proxies for ideological diversity.

We must foster an environment in which civil, robust discourse is not merely tolerated, but encouraged. We must empower our students with the tools to articulate their ideas, even when doing so is uncomfortable. We must stress the importance of genuinely listening to others, especially those with whom we are inclined to disagree. We must encourage the art of holding ideas tentatively and changing one's mind based on evolving evidence and reason. We must inculcate, in our students *and in ourselves*, an appreciation for context, nuance, ambiguity, uncertainty, and perplexity. We must encourage curiosity. And we must do all of this in a way that is civil, respectful, thoughtful, and kind. Indeed, marrying robust discourse with genuine humility and kindness should be a hallmark of UNE's approach.

We are already making progress on this work. Our Center for Global Humanities and our Tangier Global Forum host scholars from across the country and around the world to speak on important topics from various perspectives. The President's Forum brings together scholars and activists from different perspectives to discuss a timely, controversial topic in a moderated conversation. In all of these events we provide ample opportunity for students and others to engage directly with speakers. Our **Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning** provides workshops, brown bag lunches, book groups, learning communities, and other resources for faculty and professional staff on topics such as promoting difficult dialogues and teaching controversial topics. We've hosted debates between Maine's gubernatorial candidates. I myself have offered a TED talk and authored opinion pieces on the importance of viewpoint diversity. Our library has established a crowd-sourced website of **resources around diversity, equity, and inclusion**, as well as another of **resources to support viewpoint diversity**. We recently established a University **website on the Marketplace of Ideas**, which describes our position on free expression, offers various resources, and notes ongoing programming in this area. And we featured a steadfast champion of viewpoint diversity at our most recent Commencement ceremony in the person of speaker Professor Jonathan Haidt.

In addition, we're already beginning to see the emergence of grass-roots efforts. As just one example, the UNE Student Occupational Therapy Association recently launched a "Conversations and Cookies" program to foster dialogue around challenging topics among students.

I encourage you to explore these resources and to join the effort to distinguish UNE as an exemplar of what a university is supposed to be by promoting robust, respectful discourse, both inside and outside the classroom. We have much more work to do foster a truly robust Marketplace of Ideas at UNE.

Today, I make you this promise. When any of you, members of our faculty or professional staff, engage in good-faith efforts to promote difficult conversations on campus, should you face criticism from students or others for doing so, I will have your back. And I will make sure your deans and your supervisors have your back. Needless-to-say, I don't intend this to be a carte blanche for inappropriate behavior. Promoting hard conversations must be done with sensitivity and respect. But we will not follow the path of so many of our peer institutions, which now prioritize avoiding the risk of controversy and placating angry mobs over open discourse, thereby creating a stifling climate of fear and intimidation. I have your back.

In this spirit, I would also like to take this opportunity to announce a new award: *The President's Award for Constructive Discourse*. I will offer two \$1000 awards annually, one for faculty and one for professional staff, to acknowledge individuals who intentionally promote constructive dialogue on difficult or controversial topics within our community. Stay tuned for more information on how to nominate a colleague, or yourself, for this recognition.

We Nor'easters have the opportunity to assume a leadership role in this work among American universities. By doing so we will not only distinguish UNE among our peers, but more importantly we will be doing our part to address the challenges facing our troubled world. I want all of you – every person in this room – to be able to engage in discourse without inhibition or fear; to feel supported in the pursuit of knowledge and truth; and to be proud to participate in a process that is respectful and open-minded, and that promotes intellectual humility and curiosity.

Again, I thank each and every one of you for all you do to distinguish UNE as a truly extraordinary community. My very best wishes for a wonderful academic year. Together, let's all do our part to make it the best one ever.